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"It will be a lot of fun and entertaining...  
there will be pride at stake."

## Reality (golf) TV

### Meet the man behind the ambitious Emirates Amateur Golf League, a world-first concept poised to positively disrupt the golfing landscape

BY KENT GRAY

**I**N BUSINESS, Sudesh Aggarwal is an seasoned professional. After graduating with an MBA in 1973 and cutting his teeth as a management consultant for Price Waterhouse, he's built a formidable empire since 1988 with a diverse portfolio of investments ranging from food production, home furnishings and real estate to events management and even video gaming.

In golf, Aggarwal is a 14-handicapper although once got as low as six. But don't be fooled by the Dubai Creek Golf & Yacht Club founding member's more modest golf ability. The ambition and entrepreneurship that has seen him featured in a list of the top 100 Indian Businessmen in the UAE is set to disrupt the game like never before.

With the official backing of the Emirates Golf Federation and blessing of the Asia Pacific Golf Confederation (APGC), Aggarwal launched the Emirates Amateur Golf League (EAGL) on January 20. In a nutshell, it's IPL cricket meets amateur golf, a Ryder Cup-style franchise-based league with an inaugural eight-team season earmarked to start in November.

Aggarwal not only wants the Abu Dhabi Roars, Asian Jumbos, Dubai Tigers, Emirates Players, English Nicks, European Seves, Indian Singhs, Korean Choys and Pakistani Taimur to become part of the Middle East sporting narrative, he wants you, dear 14-handicapper or better, to be inspired to play. This is the royal and ancient game coming to the reality TV table. While a deal with a network is still in the wings, Aggarwal is promising 40 hours of live coverage online across the EAGL's social media networks in the first season as well as

sponsorship, PR and networking opportunities for franchisees. The audience is potentially huge given the APGC will promote the concept across the 42 countries it represents.

The EAGL has been ruminating in Aggarwal's mind since 2017 but was put on the back burner until now after he returned to India for "public engagements".

"We were to do a cricket league but then realised it is a very saturated market and something new had to be created," he revealed.

"I am a very keen amateur golfer and there is nothing exciting happening for players like us other than corporate golf days and club tournaments so I came up with the idea to do the league for amateur golfers in the same style as leagues in other sports. A league in amateur sport is going to be very challenging but I am sure we will overcome those challenges."

The cost of one of the nine franchises on offer – the first eight sold will contest the inaugural season from late Nov to Jan. 2022 – is commercially sensitive but in the six-figure bracket. Each franchise will consist of a pool of 24 players captained by two professional, non-playing coaches/captains. Each team will then play each other in a round-robin – with 12 players selected for each

match – before semifinals and a grand final. Aggarwal's beloved Creek has been teed up to host the first matches.

"We will make all efforts to take this league many notches up from the usual corporate golf days, and to the level of professional tour events," Aggarwal said. "There will be extensive opportunities for branding, hospitality, networking, entertaining clients and PR."

Ambitious? Yes. But there is something intriguing about the concept that might just see it fly. We sat down with Aggarwal to get the nitty-gritty on the EAGL and find out more about the brain behind the pioneering business model.

**You've self-titled the EAGL as the "most exciting thing to happen to amateur golf". Who do you see it appealing to?** To all amateur golfers. We shall take this league to such a level that amateur golfers will aspire to play in it. I hope this will also help grow the game in the UAE and we can contribute to the efforts of the EGF.

**Companies spend a lot on corporate golf days. I presume you see this as a much more cost-effective and value added proposition?** The EAGL, for sure, will be a very cost-effective and value-added proposition over the corporate golf days. Actually, it is much more than that. It means nine golf days, plus launch and closing parties, plus invitations. We estimate that the EAGL will give access to at least 6,000 well-to-do people in the society directly, apart from the media and live broadcast exposure.

**The TV component is a unique proposition for amateur golf. Do you think it will appeal to golfers sitting at home looking for content?** This shall be one of the major differences between corporate golf days and our league. Amateur golfers have never had the opportunity to see their fellow golfers in action live and would relate to that. As EAGL has support from the EGF and Asia Pacific Golf Confederation, it shall be promoted in 42 countries through social media channels. It will be a new territory of viewers.



#### PASSION

► Aggarwal plays off a 14 but won't tee it up in the EAGL himself.



**Will the squad places be open to men and women?** Yes, it is open for both men and women players but all members of a team will have to play from the same tees.

**You are promising 40 hours of live TV coverage? Do you have a network lined up? Do you have a commentary team?** The first challenge for us has been capturing the play as EAGL is going to be played over 4-5 courses. At the moment we are confirmed to broadcast on all our social media channels, but we are also in discussion with TV channels. As we move along, this shall be sorted out.

**What do you expect from the amateurs when the cameras are switched on?** It will be a lot of fun and entertaining as amateur golfers do not play for money. There will be pride at stake. And the quality of golf will be good as we are capping the maximum handicap at 14.

**We presume the IPL has shaped much of your thinking in terms of making the EAGL financially viable?** The EAGL will be financially viable and sustainable. The benefits that shall accrue to all stakeholders – team owners, sponsors, partners and players – will be substantial. And yes, the IPL is probably one of the most successful league-based tournaments launched in recent times and I greatly admire what they have managed to achieve.

**Tell us about your golf background?** I started playing golf about 27 years ago when I became a founder member of

Dubai Creek Golf & Yacht Club. My current index handicap is 14 and the lowest I have played to was six. I have won all kind of club tournaments and Corporate Golf Days etc. I have also been the founding Chairman of the Indian Golfers Society for 15 years.

**Will you play in the EAGL?** As a franchiser, I will avoid playing in it. I am sure we will have a lot of things to do in the background when the players take centre stage later this year.

**What return on investment do you see for a franchisee?** We anticipate a very healthy return on investment. There shall be a cash return from the franchiser sharing the sponsorship fee with the team owners and opportunity for team owners to have their own team sponsors. Returns in marketing, branding, promotions, live broadcast, media coverage, developing and entertaining clients, PR etc. shall be manifold. Appreciation in teams' valuation is another aspect and above all, the pride of owning a sports team is an immense value addition.

**Do you expect to draw the captains from the pool of UAE PGA members?** Yes, that is the plan. They will be UAE PGA members and shall be contracted by the franchiser. However, if any team owner wants to get Tiger Woods or Rory

McIlroy as their team captain, they are most welcome.

**Will the two professionals attached to each franchise act like captains?** The professionals will be coaches and act like captains. There shall be a non-playing captain as well. However, the EAGL is for amateurs only.

**You describe 'match play' formats in the launch press release. Will it change from round to round?** Yes, it will change from round to round.

**Will the matches be played off the stick and/or with handicap strokes given?** There shall be no strokes given. There will be four groups: 0-4, 5-8, 9-11 and 12-14 handicaps. The matches will be between each group players only.

**How will the 24-player squad pools be chosen?** Amateurs have to register online with their details. This shall be checked by the franchiser and once approved, these will be included in the players pool. The player has to sign a contract and pay the registration fee. Teams will have to choose the players from the players pool only. They'll have the choice to take two players of each group and rest will be by draw. This mechanism is being worked out to be fair to all team owners and keeps the interests of players as well. **G**